

Book Discussion Questions for *A White Bird Flying* by Bess Streeter Aldrich

Presented by Gretchen M. Garrison of "Odyssey Through Nebraska"

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About the author: Bess Streeter Aldrich was born on February 17th, 1881, in Cedar Falls, Iowa. She was the 8th child of James Wareham Streeter and Mary Wilson Anderson Streeter. Her closest sibling was ten years older, so she described herself as having the "world's record for the number of bosses over her."¹ As a young adult, Bess began entering story contests and even won several. She received her degree from Iowa State Normal School in 1901, then she taught for several years. During this time, she met Cap (Charles) Aldrich. They were married on September 24, 1907. In 1909, their daughter was born. Soon after, they moved to Elmwood, Nebraska, to run the American Exchange Bank in Elmwood with Bess' sister and brother-in-law. By 1920, the Aldrich family also included three sons. During these years, Bess would find snatches of time to write. She published many short stories in magazines and some of her serials became books. When her husband died in 1925, Bess' hobby became necessary for her family's livelihood. Over time, Bess wrote nine novels. Additional stories were combined into compilations. Bess died on August 3rd, 1954. In 1972, she was named to the "Nebraska Hall of Fame" and is now a part of the display at the Nebraska Capitol.

The Publication of *A White Bird Flying*: "In January 1930, Jewett (*her editor*) was still pushing Aldrich to write to him and relate 'what you can about the next novel.'" She was at last able to answer with the idea she had been mentally stirring about. Aldrich suggested that perhaps the public might want to know more about the Deals, their continuing lives, and their roles in the rural community. She sent Jewett some preliminary pages in which a young girl was the main character. He agreed that the public remained interested in the family, but he was not enthusiastic. He warned that modern agriculture was not as popular as pioneering and again stressed the importance he perceived of using, as a thread running through the work, the philosophy of an old man."² His working title for her book was *Old Man of the Prairie*. Mrs. Aldrich ended up writing Laura Deal as the main character, but pioneer Oscar Lutz from *Lantern* also played an important role.



This *A White Bird Flying* pillow can be seen in the *A Lantern in Her Hand* bedroom at the Bess Streeter Aldrich house. To take a tour, the website tells when the house is open. <https://www.bessstreeteraldrich.org/>

After Publication: "*A White Bird Flying* was in bookstores by early August 1931, and only two weeks after publication it reached best-seller lists. The book's acceptance proved that Aldrich was correct in believing that the public was still interested in the Deal family. Sales were also rewarding to Aldrich emotionally, for they proved to her that she was not written-out as had feared, and gave her confidence that that new commissions would relieve some of her worries about money."³

¹ Quoted from the *Bess Streeter Aldrich Scrapbook* by Vopal Gowman Youngberg (page 11)

² Quoted from the *Bess Streeter Aldrich* biography by Carol Miles Petersen (page 106)

³ Quoted from the *Bess Streeter Aldrich* biography by Carol Miles Petersen (page 113)

***A White Bird Flying* Characters**

This book is a sequel to <i>A Lantern in Her Hand</i> . Abbie Mackenzie Deal passed away at the end of that book. This book starts there. She and her husband, Will Deal, had five surviving children together.	
1. Mackenzie: Marries Emma Lutz; Children: Donald, Stanley and Katherine; At the end of <i>Lantern</i> , Kathie marries Jimmie Buchanan – they have a daughter named, Patty	
2. Margaret	Marries Frederick Hamilton Baker; son: Fred Baker Jr. (marries & has son later)
3. John	Marries Eloise Wentworth; Children: Wentworth, Laura (Lolly) and Millard (Trib)
5. Isabelle	Marries Harrison Scannell Rhodes; both are musicians; no children;
6. Grace	Never marries or has any children; Professor
Painting	Abbie’s Grandmother Isabelle Anders Mackenzie is remembered at Kathie’s house
Oscar Lutz	1 of 2 surviving original neighbors; winters in California; shares lots of stories
Wentworths	Eloise’s relatives – Uncle Harry and Aunt Caroline
Allen Rinemiller	Grandson of original settlers, Gus and Christine Reinmueller; spelling of last name changed to reflect the times; University student; plans to farm again in Cedartown
Christine	Allen’s Grandmother who now lives in a nursing home in Lincoln
Alpha Beta	Girls: Bernice Fowler

***A White Bird Flying* Questions**

Do you think a person should read *A Lantern in Her Hand* first? How might that make a difference?

Do you think it was important to start this book right after Abbie Deal’s death? This book then skips several years. Do you wish more years were covered?

If you are from Nebraska, what stereotypes have you heard about your state? If you are not from Nebraska, what do you think of the state? Do you think opinions have changed over the past 100 years?

“Old Oscar Lutz was Cedartown’s last old man of the prairie.” He likes to tell stories about his early pioneering days in the state. Did you enjoy his recollections, or did you find them to be tedious?

The next generation of Reinmuellers change the spelling of their name to Rinemiller. Do you think this happened in real life? Do you think this honored the family heritage?

This book tackles the transitioning of roles that was happening back in the 1920’s: gender roles, parenting roles, even agricultural roles. Did any of these defining scenes impact you?

Part of this book was devoted to college life. Laura’s mother really wanted her to be a part of the Greek system. Is this still an important part of upper-level education?

Eloise felt that her uncle had achieved great things because of his money. Later she begged him to create opportunities for her daughter. Was this move manipulative or resourceful?

Did the death of Oscar Lutz provide part of the climax of the book? What about the tree symbolism?

Laura initially said “no” to Allen’s proposal. Did you agree with that decision? Are you glad that she changed her mind?

Facilitator Guide to *A White Bird Flying* by Bess Streeter Aldrich (suggested answers to questions)

*Do you think a person should read *A Lantern in Her Hand* first? How might that make a difference?*

Opinion, but many will determine that reading the first book is always recommended before the sequel. The reader will understand more. But Mrs. Aldrich does provide enough back story throughout this book that the reader could follow along without reading the first book.

Do you think it was important to start this book right after Abbie Deal's death? This book then skips several years. Do you wish more years were covered? Opinion. Starting after Abbie's death helped this book connect with the first one. Some will like the time progression, but some will want "more Deals."

If you are from Nebraska, what stereotypes have you heard about your state? If you are not from Nebraska, what do you think of the state? Do you think opinions have changed over the past 100 years?

Many think Nebraska only offers agricultural, but that is less true today than one hundred years ago. Some people like the slower pace that takes place in much of the state, but some do not.

"Old Oscar Lutz was Cedartown's last old man of the prairie." He likes to tell stories about his early pioneering days in the state. Did you enjoy his recollections, or did you find them to be tedious?

Originally Oscar was to be the main character, but even though he is not now, he definitely is an important character. Part of the historic recollections could be rambling to some, but yet Oscar represents a former way of life. He is the connecting point between the past and the present.

The next generation of Reinmuellers change the spelling of their name to Rinemiller. Do you think this happened in real life? Do you think this honored the family heritage?

Note from the book guide author: as someone who also has worked on researching family genealogies, name changes happened frequently, both due to clerical error and personal preference. Opinions will vary on if this is honoring or not, but it probably depends on how strongly people feel about ancestors.

This book tackles the transitioning of roles that was happening back in the 1920's: gender roles, parenting roles, even agricultural roles. Did any of these defining scenes impact you?

Since these discussions happened throughout the book, covering all of them would be hard. But particularly the scenes where Kathie decided she was not sure about wanting to be a mother would be hard to read for those with maternal instincts. Progress can be both positive and painful.

Part of this book was devoted to college life. Laura's mother really wanted her to be a part of the Greek system. Is this still an important part of upper-level education?

Answers will vary. This facilitator's guide talks about the history of some of UNL's oldest sororities.

Eloise felt that her uncle had achieved great things because of his money. Later she begged him to create opportunities for her daughter. Was this move manipulative or resourceful? Opinion. Probably manipulative since she did not tell her daughter, but parents try to help their kids find a bright future.

Did the death of Oscar Lutz provide part of the climax of the book? What about the tree symbolism?

"With wrenching, twisting contortions the last old monarch of the hilltop was saying toward the last old man of the prairie." "Laura shed tears into her soft white pillow. Some of them were for old Oscar Lutz dying on the hillside all alone in the wind and the rain. Some of them were for the general sad fact that hours fly and flowers die. But most of them were shed because of her own sudden and definite realization that even through there come new days and new ways, – love stays.

Laura initially said "no" to Allen's proposal. Did you agree with that decision? Are you glad that she changed her mind? Opinion. Some prefer independence, but some like "happily ever after" books.

Margaret Widdemer, is author of the quote that inspired the book title, *A White Bird Flying*.



From a 1922 Publication
Public Domain Photo

Margaret Widdemer was born in the fall of 1884. Her Dad did not feel that girls needed a formal education, so he taught her along with her grandmother. She began writing poems as a little girl, and they sent them off to be included in publications. When she was nine years old, the *St. Nicholas Magazine* gave her a gold medal for her poetry.

In 1918, she was one of the winners of the Columbia University Prize for her book, *The Old Road to Paradise*. (Carl Sandburg was the other winner for his book, *Cornhuskers*.) Today this award is known as the Pulitzer Prize.

Although she preferred poetry, she also wrote over 30 novels including *The Red Castle Women* in 1968. Additional literary awards she received included the Lyric Prize, the Trimmed Lamp Prize, and the Literary Review Prize for Satire. She served as vice president of the Poetry Society of America and appeared on the radio series, *Do You Want to Write?*⁴

After growing up in Philadelphia and New Jersey, she lived much of her adult life in New York City. She lived in a studio near Central Park. Although she never had any children of her own, she did write nine collections of children stories.⁵

Widdemer's Inspirations: "Poetry very often comes into my head when I am in the midst of work on a novel," she explained. "And when the poetry comes you just have to write it down; it will not leave you alone otherwise," she said. "But writing a story or novel is a completely different matter. There you cannot wait for inspiration. That is one way of putting off work that must be done. I work regularly every day, setting a certain amount of words."⁶ (Note: this article was also used for the bio.)

*Pain has been, and grief enough, and bitterness and crying.
Sharp ways and stony ways I think it was she trod;
But all there is to see now is a white bird flying,
Whose bloodstained wings go circling high – circling up to God.*

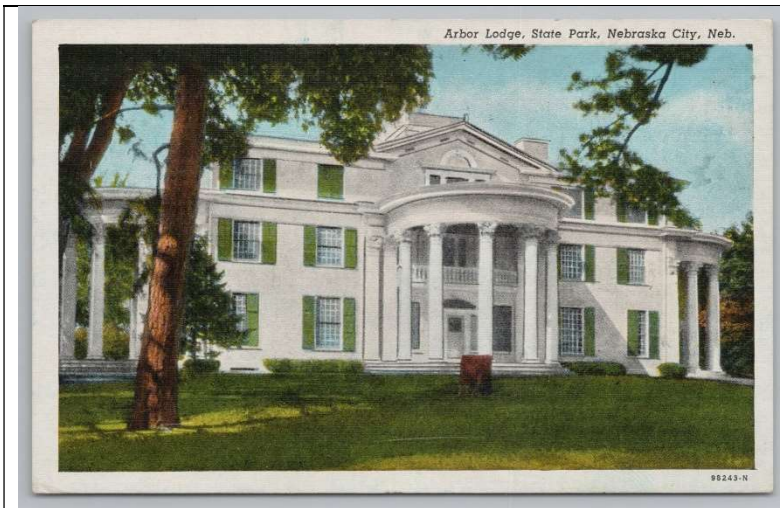
- 1) What strikes you the most about Widdemer's life?
- 2) What do you think that the "White Bird Flying" quote means?
- 3) How do you think the "poem" fits in with the *White Bird Flying* novel?

⁴ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/margaret-widdemer>

⁵ <http://mcponj.org/2022/03/18/womens-history-month-honoring-margaret-widdemer/>

⁶ Brindze, R. (1924, December 14). "Margaret Widdemer Never Went to School But Won Fame as a Writer." *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* <https://www.newspapers.com/clip/98696581/14-dec-1924-brooklyn-daily-eagle/>

In chapter 19, Allen and Laura travel to Nebraska City for the day, so she can visit her college friend, Bernice. Upon discovering her friend is out of town, they spend time at Arbor Lodge instead.



Both of these historic Nebraska City postcards are from Gretchen M. Garrison's collection (These Lodge quotations are from *A White Bird Flying*)

“The Mortons selected a spot on a hill near the Missouri, looking toward the high Iowa bluffs, and built what was then considered a notable structure, - even though but three-roomed – the only shingled house between Nebraska City and the Rocky Mountains. Here they lived and raised their sons, and with open -house hospitality welcomed all comers in that early day. Soon the homestead blossomed under the hands of these two nature lovers, - fruit trees, shade trees, evergreens, flowers, shrubs, vines surrounded the home – and that portion of the prairie was transformed into a spot of beauty.”

“Twice the original home has been remodeled, until now it stands, a stately white mansion of fifty-two rooms, with wide semi-circular porches on three sides, supported by massive two-story columns.”

- 1) Have you been to Arbor Lodge in Nebraska City before? If so, what were your impressions?
- 2) How has Arbor Day made an impact beyond Nebraska?

In Chapter 29, Laura's Aunt Isabelle and Uncle Harrison “suddenly decided to try the new Waubonsie bridge at Nebraska City.” Note: This bridge opened in 1930, right before *A White Bird Flying* was published. This bridge connected with the town's business district and was closed in 1986 in favor of a larger interstate bypass. Did you ever travel on this Nebraska City bridge?

“The Waubonsie Bridge built by the Kansas City Bridge Company called itself "The Bridge with a State park at Each End" because Arbor Lodge State Park was on the Nebraska side and Waubonsie State Park was on the Iowa side. The Waubonsie Bridge replaced a pontoon bridge built in 1888 that claimed to be the largest drawbridge of its kind in the world. The pontoon bridge was more than long and the middle of the bridge could swing open providing a -wide passage.”⁷



⁷ <https://maps.roadtrippers.com/us/ia/points-of-interest/nebraska-city-bridge> provided the quotation and information

Fraternities and Sororities

“If John Deal did not care about his daughter going Greek, Eloise had no greater desire than that she would.” Chapter 8 in “A White Bird Flying” is all about college organizations, particularly the Greek system. As this chapter illustrates, pledging can bring about strong feelings. Laura Deal’s mother had opinions.

But Eloise chose for her. “Alpha Beta,” she said unhesitatingly, firmly. “That’s your first choice, Laura. I do hope they will take you. It seemed the last word to me in an aristocratic group.

Gamma Zeta is your second choice, and Rho Phi third. When you turn in your list, that’s the way they are to be listed.”

This book is clearly set at the University of Nebraska, but the Greek houses mentioned are not actual organizations. Do you think that Mrs. Aldrich did that on purpose? Was it necessary?

Here are four of the oldest sororities that are still on the UNL campus today.

<p>Kappa Kappa Gamma notes that “Our Sigma Chapter was 1 of 3 all-female Fraternities established at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln back in 1870.”⁸ The Sigma name was assigned to their chapter in May 1884. Their notable white house was built in 1925.</p>		<p>Delta Gamma (Kappa) “Fall 1887 - A campus of only 500 students, the University of Nebraska’s social life was centered around 2 literary societies, the Union & Palladian. Ada Caldwell and Sara Schwab were frustrated with this, so they decided to form a new fraternity.”⁹ This took place in 1888.</p>	
<p>The University welcomed the Tri-Delta sorority in 1894. The house was built in 1926 and still stands on the corner of 16 and R streets. The home is considered a historical structure because the fence surrounding the house was donated by General Pershing, who had two sisters in the sorority.¹⁰</p>		<p>Kappa Alpha Theta “was the first sorority house planned and built on the University of Nebraska campus as a permanent residence to promote women’s participation in a college education. Designed by Ellery Davis, Sr., at a cost of \$52,00, the house opened on September 2, 1925.”¹¹</p>	 <p style="text-align: center;">All house photos by Gretchen Garrison</p>

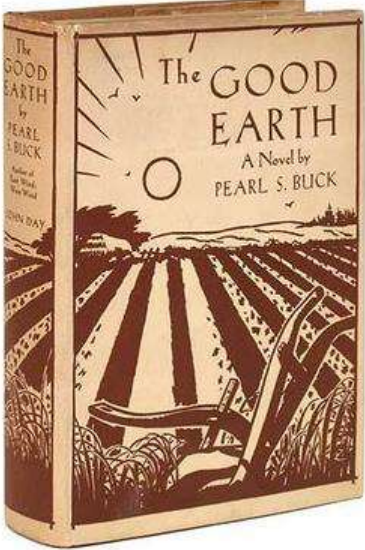
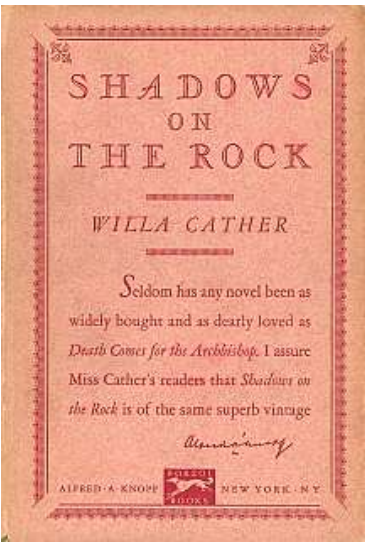

⁸ <https://unl.kappa.org/>

⁹ <http://www.unldeltagamma.com/chapter-history.html>

¹⁰ <https://unlhistory.unl.edu/exhibits/show/delta-delta-delta/the-early-years>

¹¹ <https://www.kappaalphatheta-rho.com/our-history>

“A *White Bird Flying* was third in sales for the entire country in 1931, topped only by Pearl Buck’s *The Good Earth* and Willa Carter’s (*Cather’s*) *Shadow on the Rocks*. (Note that all three of these best-selling novels were written by women.)”¹² All three books were written about specific places.

<i>The Good Earth</i> by Pearl Buck	<i>Shadow on the Rocks</i> by Cather	<i>A White Bird Flying</i> by Aldrich
 <p>The cover of <i>The Good Earth</i> features a sepia-toned illustration of a rural Chinese landscape. In the foreground, a wooden plow is pulled across a field. The background shows rolling hills under a sky with a sun or moon and a few birds. The title 'The GOOD EARTH' is prominently displayed at the top, with 'A Novel by PEARL S. BUCK' below it.</p>	 <p>The cover of <i>Shadows on the Rock</i> is a light-colored, possibly pinkish, paper with a decorative border. The title 'SHADOWS ON THE ROCK' is in large, bold, serif letters. Below it, the author's name 'WILLA CATHER' is written. A quote from another author is included: 'Seldom has any novel been as widely bought and as dearly loved as <i>Death Comes for the Archbishop</i>. I assure Miss Cather's readers that <i>Shadows on the Rock</i> is of the same superb vintage.' The publisher's name 'ALFRED A. KNOPP' and 'NEW YORK, N.Y.' are at the bottom.</p>	 <p>The cover of <i>A White Bird Flying</i> has a dark, blue-toned illustration. It depicts a classical building with a pediment and columns, possibly a school or a government building, with a path leading to it. A white bird is shown in flight above the building. The title 'A WHITE BIRD FLYING' is at the top in large, bold letters. Below the illustration, it says 'BY THE AUTHOR OF A LANTERN IN HER HAND' and 'BESS STREETER ALDRICH'.</p>
<p>Wikipedia Image</p>	<p>Wikipedia Image</p>	<p>Amazon Image</p>
<p>Goodreads Description: This tells the poignant tale of a Chinese farmer and his family in old agrarian China. The humble Wang Lung glories in the soil he works, nurturing the land as it nurtures him and his family. Nearby, the nobles of the House of Hwang consider themselves above the land and its workers; but they will soon meet their own downfall.</p> <p>Hard times come upon Wang Lung & his family when flood and drought force them to seek work in the city. The working people riot, breaking into the homes of the rich and forcing them to flee. When Wang Lung shows mercy to one noble and is rewarded, he begins to rise in the world, even as the House of Hwang falls.</p>	<p>Goodreads Description: Set in seventeenth-century Canada, an evocation of North American origins highlights the men and women who struggled to adapt to the new world even as they clung to the one they left behind.</p> <p>DISCUSSION QUESTIONS</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Which book would you buy based on the original cover alone? 2) Which book would you buy based on the description? 3) Why do you think these books were the bestsellers? 4) If you have read more than one of these three books, which one was your favorite? Why? 5) Which place would you prefer to read about? 	<p>Goodreads Description: Abbie Deal, the matriarch of a pioneer Nebraska family, has died at the beginning of <i>A White Bird Flying</i>, leaving her china and heavy furniture to others and to her granddaughter Laura the secret of her dream of finer things. Grandma Deal's literary aspirations had been thwarted by the hard circumstances of her life, but Laura vows that nothing, no one, will deter her from a successful writing career. Childhood passes, and the more she repeats her vow the more life intervenes.</p> <p>Note: The original cover (shown above) artwork was completed by James Aldrich, Mrs. Aldrich's son. He completed the drawings and paintings for several of her covers.</p>

¹² Quoted from the *Bess Streeter Aldrich Scrapbook* by Vopal Gowman Youngberg (page 24)

In Other News ... What Was Said in the Newspaper About *A White Bird Flying*

<p>“Here is a simply told, delightful novel of modern life in the Middle West, written by Bess Streeter Aldrich, whose “A Lantern in her Hand” was a perfect story of the same locale in pioneer days. With the same artistry which she employed in telling her beautiful story of a pioneer woman, she sketches the life of Laura Deal, granddaughter of one of the pioneers. The result is a book in which one feels safe in prophesying will reach national best- seller lists within a few days.”</p> <p>Not only is the story in “A White Bird Flying” delightful, but it is a pleasant tale, which is certainly a relief to one condemned to read so many pseudo epics of life in the raw. Believe it or not, there isn’t a single hussy, pervert or depraved creature in all the 336 pages of “A White Bird Flying.”¹³</p>	<p><i>White Bird Flying</i> “is just such an uninspired, unimaginative story as the type just mentioned. It lacks nearly every element of greatness and contains nearly every sign of mediocrity. At moments, it even descends into the realm of the juvenile, when its author uses school-girl quotations from Shakespeare and what-have-you to illustrate the depths of emotions felt by her characters.</p> <p>The Middle West may have its romance; Edna Ferber, by artistry, sleight-of-hand, intuition and sensitiveness, has made clay banks, muddy rivers, cigar store Indians, and drab lives over into the stuff of which dreams and great stories are woven. But the in-between author hasn’t the genius to recreate the dull things, and breathe the life of the universe into them.</p> <p>Mrs. Aldrich has laid her story in Nebraska. Much of the book deals with proving that Nebraska is a civilized state in which automobiles and country clubs are numerous. What of it? The attitude of the East to the West, of scorn and ridicule, is as old as any American writing, and probably, will live many more hundreds of years. Pioneer tales have been worked to death, but never so boringly told as in <i>White Bird Flying</i>.”¹⁴</p>	<p>“Bess Streeter Aldrich’s “A White Bird Flying will furnish the background for the Sunday morning sermon of the Rev. R.S. Kenaston, pastor of the Fourth Street Methodist Church. The sermon will in sense be a book review but will be based on the line from a poem which refers to “a white bird flying, whose blood-stained wings go circling, high – circling up to God.” The service starts at 10:50 o’clock.”¹⁵</p>
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1) The first review is positive, but the second review is quite negative. One reviewer appreciated reading what she considered to be a pleasant story. But the second reviewer clearly was looking for more excitement. Which reviewer do you agree with? Can you see elements of truth in both reviews?

2) Edna Ferber’s novels are mentioned in the second review. Her books have also remained in publication, and many were made into films. Have you read any of her books or seen any of her adapted movies? How do her books compare with Mrs. Aldrich’s books?

3) The third newsclip is about a sermon that connected to *A White Bird Flying*. Can you see the connection between the inspirational poem and the Bible? Would you enjoy listening to a message on this topic?

¹³ The Times Dispatch (Richmond, Virginia) “An Excellent Novel About Middle Western Life” by Polly Daffron 8-9-1931

¹⁴ The Post Crescent (Appleton, Wisconsin) p. 1 “Books and Bookmen” Column by Eleanor Evans Wing 11-14-1931

¹⁵ Moberly Monitor-Index (Moberly, Missouri) p. 3 “White Bird Flying Sermon.” 9-23-1933